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## Shifting baselines

19 02 2009



A term first coined by [Daniel Pauly](#) (who we've previously covered as a [Conservation Scholar](#)), and one I could easily classify as a conservation [Classic](#), it essentially describes the way changes to a system are measured against previous baselines, which themselves may represent changes from the original state of the system (definition modified from [Wikipedia](#)). Pauly [originally meant it in a fisheries context](#), where "... [fisheries scientists sometimes fail to identify the correct "baseline" population size \(e.g., how abundant a fish species population was before human exploitation\) and thus work with a shifted baseline](#)".

It's easily considered a mantra in fisheries (there's even [a dedicated Scienceblog on the topic](#), and several other fisheries-related websites [e.g., [here](#) & [here](#)]), but it has been extended to all sorts of other conservation issues.

As it turns out, however, quantifying 'shifting baselines' in conservation is rather difficult, and there's little good evidence in most systems (despite the logic and general acceptance of its ubiquity by conservation scientists). Now Papworth and colleagues have addressed this empirical hole in their new paper entitled [Evidence for shifting baseline syndrome in conservation](#) published online recently in [Conservation Letters](#).

Papworth et al. discuss two kinds of shifting baselines: (1) general amnesia ("... individuals setting their perceptions from their own experience, and failing to pass their experience on to future generations") and (2) personal amnesia ("... individuals updating their own perception of normality; so that even those who experienced different previous conditions believe that current conditions are the same as past conditions"), and they provide three well-quantified examples: (a) perceptions of bushmeat hunters in Gabon, (b) perceptions of bushmeat hunters in Equatorial Guinea and (c) perceptions of bird population trends in the UK.

Although the data have issues, all three cases demonstrate convincing evidence of the shifting baselines syndrome (with the UK example providing an example of both general and personal amnesia). Now, this may all seem rather logical, but I don't want the reader to underestimate the importance of the Papworth paper - this is really one of the first demonstrations that it is a real problem in vastly different systems (i.e., not just fisheries). I think it's hard evidence that the issue is a big one and cannot be ignored when presenting historical data for conservation purposes.



Humans inevitably have short memories when it comes to environmental degradation - this essentially means that in most demonstrations of biodiversity decline, it's probably a lot worse even than the data might suggest. Policy makers take note.

[CJA Bradshaw](#)



« [One year later: Conservation Letters](#)

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